

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Secretary Clinton Opens “Strategic Dialogue” with Civil Society Groups

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says global civil society groups must be engaged to take advantage of the opportunities presented by popular demands for more freedoms in the Middle East and elsewhere.

She also announced that the Obama administration is more than doubling its assistance to activists, journalists and other human rights champions around the world.

Clinton spoke February 16 at the inaugural “Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society” at the State Department. The Obama administration has been using strategic partnerships and dialogues as a means for deeper consultations and commitment with select nations. The dialogues are designed to respond to the specific needs of partner nations and enhance cooperation in critical areas.

The strategic dialogue marked the first time that the United States has used such a forum to partner with an entire group, rather than a government, Clinton said. She was joined in Washington by civil-society representatives from more than 20 countries and thousands more who participated in the event through a live videoconference.

The secretary said she hoped that regular contact between civil society groups and U.S. officials will help to build “habits of cooperation,” increase understanding to produce practical results, share insights and make it easier to identify common problems and interests.

“Our work together on women’s rights, corruption, religious freedom and other issues is just as important as anything we do with governments,” Clinton said.

The recent political unrest in Tunisia and Egypt “makes our meeting even more timely and the issues more urgent,” Clinton said. “We have to tap the expertise, experience and energy of civil society” to “take advantage of this historic moment.”

Clinton said the Obama administration will more than double its financial support for “efforts to respond to threats to civil society, to help human rights workers who have been arrested, activists who have been intimidated, journalists who have been censored.”

She said the United States has also launched “an international fund that will provide quick assistance such as communications, gear and legal support” to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have been

affected by government crackdowns.

Tomicah Tillemann, Clinton’s senior adviser for civil society and emerging democracies, told reporters February 16 that the new funding will be used to identify what he described as “regulatory threats” to civil society.

“These are instances where laws restrict the ability of NGOs or activists to operate and to act freely in the manner that they would like,” Tillemann said. “In the last six years, 50 countries have passed legislation that restricts the space in which civil society can operate, and we will be doubling our funding through [the U.S. Agency for International Development] to programs that are designed to identify and address those legal and regulatory threats,” he said.

The amount targeting the regulatory threats will rise from approximately \$1.5 million to \$3.4 million.

Clinton said U.S. support for democracy and human rights “is not about siding for or against either governments or citizens,” but about “standing up for universal principles and for those in and out of government who support them.”

She said the Obama administration will support the efforts of partner governments to open their political and economic systems and she urged others to follow their example.

“Governments that pursue democratic change [and] economic openness will have a friend in the United States,” she said.

United States, China Cultivate Partnership Through China Garden

By Sadie May Davis
Staff Writer

Washington — As a symbol of longstanding partnership, the United States and China have committed to construction of a classical Chinese garden at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington.

Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and China’s ambassador to the United States, Zhang Yesui, signed the agreement January 24. Jiang Zehui, executive director for the Chinese side of the garden project, also attended the ceremony.

“Today’s signing ceremony illustrates the commitment our two countries have to horticulture, science and the arts,” Vilsack said. “This garden will serve as a testament to our countries’ celebrated cultural histories and will delight visitors for generations to come. I am pleased to join Ambassador Zhang and Madame Jiang Zehui to help

turn this symbol of bilateral friendship into a reality.”

The cooperatively constructed garden will be a gift from the Chinese people to the American people. Members of China’s Academy of Forestry and the U.S. Department of Agriculture conceived the design of the nearly five-hectare China Garden as a way to enhance ties between the two nations through mutual understanding.

Although the Arboretum’s China Garden will have an original layout, its designers strive to recreate the soothing elements of nature, as in other gardens of its type, through rock sculptures, plants for all seasons, a half-hectare lake and architecture that includes a teahouse, traditional stone bridges and six-sided pavilions. The China Garden will be constructed on the east side of the Arboretum, near Holly Spring Road.

The State Forestry Administration of the People’s Republic of China will supply landscaping in the form of 22 structures, classical Chinese art and furnishings, and rockeries for the garden, while the United States will prepare the site for construction and provide long-term maintenance.

According to the project website, the China Garden will include three distinct sections: the Mountain House of Sliced Stone, the Ge (Four Seasons) Garden and the Garden Floating on the Lake. Each portion will emphasize different aspects of Chinese culture while helping visitors enjoy the natural beauty and views of the area.

The China Garden will also foster ties between the U.S. and Chinese governments by providing valuable research opportunities. The National Arboretum plans to cultivate select Chinese plants in the garden to test their ability to survive in the climate of the United States, and will breed new and improved plant varieties in the garden for use as ornamental landscape plants.

The China Garden will serve as a focal point for learning about Chinese gardening tradition as well as a gathering place for educational and cultural events. The space will be used for special celebrations of the Chinese New Year and full-moon festivals.

The National China Garden Foundation, a nonprofit organization, will raise funds for the project. According to Arboretum Director Colien Hefferan, the foundation aims to raise an estimated \$50 million to complete the China Garden.

While there is no set completion date, preliminary design work and environmental assessments have begun. The next steps the Arboretum will take include conducting architectural and engineering assessments.

WORLD-CLASS EXHIBITS

Established in 1927 by Congress, the National Arboretum covers 180.5 hectares, and its employees welcome more than 500,000 visitors a year. Gardens and exhibits include collections of Asian plants, azaleas, dogwoods and perennials, the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum, the National Grove of State Trees, the National Herb Garden and many others.

According to its mission statement, the National Arboretum “serves the public need for scientific research, education and gardens that conserve and showcase plants to enhance the environment.” Employees strive to establish and maintain collaborative, educational partnerships both domestically and internationally.

The National Arboretum community of staff, volunteers and interns conducts research projects related to plant classification, growth and preservation as well as new technologies in the floral and nursery industries. Having published more than 120 articles in scientific journals in the last three years, staff and volunteers spend much of their time sharing new information with visitors through a variety of public education programs.

In addition to its cooperative agreement with China, the National Arboretum works with several countries, including Japan and South Korea.

U.S. Western Hemisphere Policy “Informed,” “Optimistic”

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama’s Western Hemisphere policy is “informed, engaged, dynamic, collaborative and optimistic,” says Arturo Valenzuela, U.S. assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs.

Valenzuela testified on U.S. policy toward Latin America to the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee February 15.

He said the United States is “deeply engaged in the Americas” and that the Obama administration is working “tirelessly to safeguard democratic values, promote economic opportunity and social inclusion, strengthen regional security and advance U.S. interests.”

He said the administration is “committed to leadership in the Western Hemisphere” that is guided by a set of core principles.

“We believe that the best framework for engaging with the Americas is one based on mutual partnership and co-responsibility,” Valenzuela said. The United States has a

"vital stake in the hemisphere's prosperity," he said, and "contributing to its success is good policy because it benefits all the people of the Americas."

Solutions to regional challenges, he said, "will be more impactful, durable and sustainable if we partner with nations that share our common values and goals." Valenzuela called the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean "undeniably promising partners in confronting crucial regional and global challenges."

He said the United States is "optimistic about the hemisphere's course."

"In much of the region, we are seeing the convergence of two powerful and positive trends: the consolidation of successful market democracies that are making big strides in meeting their peoples' needs, and growing global integration," Valenzuela said.

He added that the greatest regional challenges, including inequality, lack of transparency and accountability, insufficient respect for human rights, ineffective institutions and lack of opportunity are receding in most countries in the Americas.

Valenzuela commended nations of the hemisphere for recognizing their stake in new global challenges, such as food security, climate change, transnational crime and economic competitiveness.

But he said that while "many countries in the Americas have strong and healthy democracies, we all still have work to do."

He said countries in the hemisphere need to be "clear-eyed and proactive" in addressing risks to the regional agenda, including "attempts to expand ... populist rule at the expense of fundamental minority rights, effective democratic governance, or dialogue and consensus within the rule of law."

Valenzuela expressed concern about nondemocratic political developments in Venezuela and Cuba, while praising progress in Honduras that he said has strengthened governance and set the country on a "path towards democratic normalization."

"Though our hemispheric agenda remains manifestly inclusive and seeks points of convergence even in difficult cases, we remain steadfast in our commitment to core principles and recognition of key values such as human and labor rights, media freedom and the importance of robust democratic institutions," he said.

Valenzuela said the success of Latin America and the Caribbean will "continue to rely on the consolidation of

vibrant democratic institutions that are responsive to their citizens and capable of expanding the boundaries of freedom, creating greater social prosperity, unlocking the economic potential of markets, deepening the rule of law and fostering respect for human rights."

U.S. Health Initiative to Focus on Poor, Rural Areas Worldwide

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama's Global Health Initiative will turn its focus to community-based approaches and health care solutions for the poorest, most rural areas around the world, says Dr. Rajiv Shah, administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

"Our largest opportunities to improve human health and the human condition do not lie in optimizing services to the 10 to 20 percent of people in the developing world who have good access to world-class facilities. They lie in extending our reach to the 80, 90 percent of people who do not," Shah said during a global health lecture at the U.S. National Institutes of Health February 15.

"That is our battleground, and I'm proud to say that is where USAID will try to lead the fight," he said, but he added that doing so "will require a change in our own mindset."

"We need to focus much more on inventing solutions that extend the reach of health care in the poorest settings on the planet," Shah said, efforts that he said will require the agency to "set goals, design strategies and cut the time it takes to transform discoveries in the lab to success on the ground."

As part of this new approach, Shah said USAID will release an annual accountability review of global health technology, "detailing product introduction and adoption and identifying those areas where we can accelerate progress." He said the agency will also leverage its commodity procurement to increase volume and decrease price by investing in new technologies.

Shah emphasized the importance of vaccines, calling them "the best public health investment we can make" and the "best hope of sustainably eliminating malaria, tuberculosis and ... HIV/AIDS."

He said USAID will enhance its vaccine team, which will lead efforts in making vaccines more available and affordable worldwide.

Shah praised the Global Health Initiative's success thus far in leading to "real, concrete results," such as a

dramatic increase in the presence of skilled health workers during childbirths and a remarkable decline in the number of malaria cases across Africa. He also commended recent strides made to combat HIV and tuberculosis, including a series of new microbicides, diagnostics and treatments that USAID is working to market and distribute.

The Global Health Initiative was proposed by President Obama in 2009 to help some of the poorest regions in the world combat health challenges that kill people who could be saved with improved health care.

According to the State Department, the six-year, \$63 billion initiative aims to “help partner countries improve health outcomes through strengthened health systems” while maximizing “the sustainable health impact the United States achieves for every dollar invested.”

Rising Food Prices Pushing Millions into Poverty, World Bank Says

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Global food prices have risen 29 percent from a year ago, driven by a combination of weather shocks and food export bans, and these higher prices are forcing millions more people into extreme poverty, World Bank President Robert Zoellick says.

The World Bank’s Food Price Index shows that food prices are now 29 percent higher than they were a year ago and only 3 percent below the peak of the last food crisis in June 2008, Zoellick said February 15.

“This is serious cause for concern,” Zoellick said. “The key driver behind the upward spiral in the food price index has been sharp rises in the prices of wheat, maize, sugar and oils.”

A combination of weather shocks in various wheat-producing nations followed by export bans in some nations has curbed supplies of wheat and caused prices for the grain to more than double from the lows of June 2010 to January of this year, Zoellick said. For example, Russia banned grain exports until the end of the 2011 harvest, according to news reports.

World Bank research shows higher global wheat prices have directly fed into sharp increases in domestic wheat prices. In six months, prices for wheat rose by more than 50 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 45 percent in Bangladesh and 33 percent in Mongolia, he said.

Zoellick also said that it is “a matter of serious concern” to see maize prices in January that were 73 percent higher than six months ago. He added that in the last quarter

there has been a 20 percent rise in the global price of sugar and a 22 percent rise for fats and oils.

“The only reprieve we have at the moment is the fact that global rice prices have not matched the dramatic rises in wheat and other prices,” Zoellick said. “Rice prices need monitoring though, given moves by some countries to significantly import more rice to boost domestic stocks.”

World Bank analysts say good harvests in many African nations have helped to keep prices stable, but there are some serious problems. “In Burundi, for example, people are affected by a 48 percent rise in bean prices — that’s an important food source. And in Cameroon, bean prices were up 43 percent,” Zoellick said.

The World Bank said recent food price hikes have pushed about 44 million people into extreme poverty, which is defined as income of no more than a dollar and a quarter a day. More than half of a poor family’s income goes to buy basic foodstuffs, the bank said.

“High and volatile food prices are the key major challenge facing many developing countries today,” Zoellick said. “Even before these latest price hikes, there were already more than 900 million people going hungry each day.”

As millions more people around the globe face extreme poverty, it means another difficult year for the chronically malnourished, he added.

An additional concern is that food shortages could spur food riots and civil strife as occurred in 2008, the World Bank said.

According to the World Bank, when food demand far exceeded the supply in 2008 in many less-developed nations, food riots and civil strife threatened to topple governments in more than 50 nations. Rising food prices can serve as an aggravating factor in any nation where civil and political instability have arisen.

“We need global action to help turn that around — to help smallholder farmers with seeds and fertilizer, better weather forecasting, better means to get produce to markets, also food and effective safety nets for the most vulnerable people — pregnant women and babies under 2 years of age,” Zoellick said.

Zoellick said there is no quick fix to resolving volatile food prices, but food security has now become a global security issue.

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